

Answers to Questions not reached in Plenary 18 October 2001

[R] signifies that the Member has declared an interest.

[W] signifies that the question was tabled in Welsh.

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Questions on Local Government to the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities

Introducing a Supplementary Business Rate in Wales

Q9 Alun Cairns: Who does the Minister plan to consult regarding proposals to introduce a supplementary business rate in Wales? (OAQ13003)

The Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities (Edwina Hart): I refer you to the answer that I gave to your question 4 (OAQ13040) in Plenary earlier today.

Proposed Models of Governance

Q10 Jonathan Morgan: Will local councils have to consult residents on the proposed models of governance set out in the Local Government Act 2000? (OAQ13001)

Edwina Hart: Yes. Section 25(2) of that Act requires local authorities to consult with their communities and other interested parties on the four options for new political management structures.

Local Government Performance Agreements

Q11 Brian Gibbons: Will the Minister give an update on local government performance agreements? (OAQ12996)

Edwina Hart: I recently completed a consultation exercise on an evaluation protocol for policy agreements. Responses were generally favourable.

I intend that the policy agreements that are ready for signature will be in place by the end of this month, and this will signal the release of the first tranche of performance incentive grant to authorities.

My officials will work with the small number of authorities whose policy agreements are not yet ready for signature to ensure that they will be ready soon after that.

Equal Opportunities in Local Government

Q12 Mick Bates: What progress is being made to ensure a common approach to equal opportunities in local government? (OAQ12992)

Edwina Hart: The leader of the Welsh Local Government Association announced in September that a generic equality standard for local government had been developed in partnership with the statutory equality bodies. In July, I announced a grant totalling £800,000 to the WLGA, to enable it to establish an

equalities unit to advise local authorities on the implementation of this standard, as well as advising the Assembly on equal opportunities in relation to local government policy.

Asset Management Plans

Q13 Janet Ryder: What guidance has the Minister issued to local authorities regarding the development of asset management plans? (OAQ12977)

Edwina Hart: Assembly officials have been members of a joint working group under the auspices of the Welsh Local Government Association in drawing up guidance for local government on the development of asset management plans, which was launched at a conference on 13 September 2001. I endorsed the issue of that guidance.

The Role of Community and Town Councils

Q14 David Melding: Will the Minister make a statement on the future role of community and town councils in Wales? (OAQ12998)

Edwina Hart: Community and town councils play an important role in providing services to, and representing the interests of, local people and their communities. I will shortly commission research on their role. It will consider all aspects of community and town councils' activities. I intend that it will form the basis of the Assembly's future policy on community and town councils.

Electoral Arrangements

Q15 Jocelyn Davies: Will the Minister provide an update on the work of the commission on electoral arrangements for local government in Wales? (OAQ12979)

Edwina Hart: The commission is an independent body and I do not expect to receive interim reports on its progress towards fulfilling its remit. However, I understand that the commission held meetings on 25 June and 28 September, that it took oral evidence from various parties and organisations on 22 and 23 October and that it will soon begin a series of visits to individual authorities. I have asked the commission to report by the end of June 2002.

Questions to the Minister for Environment

Access to Transport for Disabled People

Q7 Peter Black: What discussions has the Minister had with transport operators around Wales with regards to ensuring equal access for disabled people to their services? (OAQ12964) [R]

The Minister for Environment (Sue Essex): I have met rail companies and the Confederation of Passenger Transport. We have discussed a range of issues, including the needs of disabled passengers. I am pleased that progress is being made in introducing, for example, low-floor buses. Infrastructure work undertaken by local authorities is making matters easier but there is still much to do.

Bus Services in Wales

Q8 Lynne Neagle: Will the Minister make a statement on the administration's commitment to ensuring that bus service users are given a reliable and efficient service in all parts of Wales? (OAQ13033)

Sue Essex: We are committed to working in partnership with local authorities and bus operators to achieve services of the highest possible quality throughout Wales. I understand that problems in recruiting and retaining drivers recently affected the reliability of services in and around Torfaen but that the

situation is now much improved. I emphasise that the National Assembly for Wales is not in direct control of buses.

Safety of Waste Incineration

Q9 Alun Cairns: Will the Minister make a statement on the safety of waste incineration? (OAQ12956)

Sue Essex: We should manage our waste to minimise the risks to human health and the environment, and there are regulations in place. This applies to recycling, composting, energy from waste (including incineration) and landfill. There is no risk-free way of managing waste.

Protection of Historic Monuments and Archaeological Sites

Q10 Ann Jones: Will the Minister make a statement on the importance of protecting historic monuments and archaeological sites in Wales? (OAQ13042)

Sue Essex: Archaeological and historic remains are a finite, irreplaceable resource. Those of national importance are scheduled, which confers statutory protection and requires the Assembly's prior consent to any works, making unauthorised works an offence. Through Cadw, the Assembly also supports various programmes aimed at preserving the historic environment, including grants and funding of the Welsh archaeological trusts.

Single Railway Franchise for Wales and the Marches

Q11 Owen John Thomas: What discussions has the Minister had with her counterpart at Westminster regarding the awarding of a single franchise for railways in Wales and the Marches? (OAQ13017)

Sue Essex: I have held discussions with John Spellar, the Minister for Transport at the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, regarding the awarding of a single franchise for railways in Wales. I have also stressed the importance of this issue to Stephen Byers, the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions.

Survey of Coal Tips in Wales

Q12 Brian Gibbons: Has the Minister any plans to undertake a survey of the coal tips in Wales that still need remediation? (OAQ12954)

Sue Essex: Local authorities are the responsible bodies for ensuring the stability of disused coal tips. I arranged a tip stability seminar with members and officers of local authorities in March to discuss their responsibilities for, and provide guidance on, the remediation of tips.

Traffic Congestion Relief for Menai Bridge

Q13 Peter Rogers: Are there any traffic congestion relief proposals for the Menai bridge under active consideration? (OAQ13018)

Sue Essex: No. It is considered that the Britannia bridge and Menai bridges will provide adequate traffic capacity for links to Anglesey in the foreseeable future.

Development of the Passenger Rail Network

Q14 Peter Law: What action is the Minister taking to develop the passenger rail network throughout Wales? (OAQ12965)

Sue Essex: We have ensured that rail has a prominent part in developing our integrated transport policy, which emphasises accessibility for people with unmet transport needs and the encouragement of modal shift. I announced a five-year programme of support for local authority transport last January, which included significant investment in rail projects, including improvements on the Valley Lines, the reopening of the Vale of Glamorgan line to passengers, and the Cambrian line. I have also supported, in principle, the reopening of the line to Ebbw Vale for passenger services.

Application to Build a Waste Incinerator at Crymlyn Burrows

Q15 Alun Cairns: Will the Minister make a statement on the progress of the application to build a waste incinerator at Crymlyn Burrows? (OAQ12957)

Sue Essex: I understand that the Environment Agency expects to be in a position to complete the determination of the application shortly.